

Pulse

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Dad stopped the car on the hill above school and put it in park. He always drove to this spot, unless it was raining, so he didn't have to wade through the school traffic down below.

The heat was on full blast, which meant Dad was making the Impala cozy for a chat. "Thanks for driving," I said, shuffling like I was about to leave. I didn't want him to think that I knew he wanted to talk.

"No problem," Dad said. He was wearing his dark blue polyester hat. "You know, I hop on the interstate from here." He pointed down the road. "It only takes ten minutes."

I nodded like I was interested, like he hadn't told me this a dozen times before. It was November and the trees had just turned from colorful to dull. The last leaves clung around the waists of the trunks looking desperate, with no promise of relief. And the skies had shifted, from piercing blue to drywall gray. Winter seemed inescapable.

"Listen," Dad said.

The Impala dashboard clock read 7:59. Dad would have to write me a note, again. I'd miss homeroom, for sure, miss hearing if Jerry Dock, my closest friend, was going to be suspended for spray painting "Talk about a Revolution" on the bathroom stall partitions. I didn't mind missing school though, the constant dull threat of a fight or insult whispered into my neck while walking down the halls, everything feeling like a low-grade infection which there's no antibiotic for. I wouldn't be missing any education either; the only thing I had learned this semester so far was that spray paint is hard to remove from the skin in a hurry.

That, and how it felt to be in love.

"I'm sorry about last night," Dad said, looking out over the school roof to the city beyond. With his hands on the wheel, he looked like he was still driving.

I sat there, feeling the engine purr, feeling that swelling in my pants. I tugged my corduroy coat over my crotch, both hands buried in the pockets, so I could hide it, or touch myself if I got bored. I might as well get comfortable, I thought.

Dad coughed. "Your Mom and I wondered how much you heard," he said. He stared below the steering wheel, like he was confessing something bad.

"I heard the loud parts," I said. The coat fabric gave a little each time my muscles contracted, and I had to time it so Dad wouldn't see. Love. I felt it for a boy. His name was Aaron Platz.

"Well," Dad said, "we have been having a time of it, your mother and I."

A time of it. What a meaningless expression, I thought. Me, I felt I had a world of time between each of his words, like when I was in that stupid-ass comedy Mrs. Wiley had us put on last year. I liked Dad ok, but I didn't want to hear all this. Still, I wondered how much of math I would miss.

Dad made his little sad smile, the "it's too bad" smile. "It's hard to keep it all together," he said.

"It?" I said, already knowing what he meant—knowing he would squirm at the question.

"The family," Dad said, "I guess. Our relationship."

I grunted, not cruelly, just to signal that now I understood his

meaning. Down below, the buses were gone and the last of the students were heading inside. The Impala was getting pretty hot and Dad took off his scarf, unbuttoned his coat. School was starting to feel like a better option. Or just going off into the bathroom and jerking off.

I never pictured anyone when I did it. Not even Aaron Platz. It was just sensation, like tiny shots of morphine to get me through my days.

"We're trying to work things out," Dad said, "for you kids." A film of moisture formed on Dad's edge of the windshield.

"Not for yourselves?" I said.

"Well, of course, for us, too," Dad said. "I only meant, we're mostly thinking about you two." He cleared his throat. "We're willing to make certain sacrifices."

Certain sacrifices, I thought—but not other ones? I pressed down on my pants again and saw out of my periphery, my muscles react, diffused by layers of clothes—like a distant ripple, pulsing out from a stone dropped in water. Being in love with Aaron was something other than sex, though my heart pounded heavy when I was near him. My blood was all involved, but not down there. I just wanted to be with him, to have his eyes looking back at me. Of course, Aaron didn't have a clue about all that.

"I never wanted it to be like this," Dad said. He looked over at me then, while delivering this next line—as if he were certain that it, above all the others, was true: "I love your mother very much," he said.

The word love caught inside me, like those shirts and ropes and beer cans you see tangled in broken tree limbs by the river after a storm. I felt that quarry feeling in my stomach, like the one I get the

first moment of waking, when I become aware that I'm alive, that I'm still me, and that a school day lies ahead.

Aaron Platz was a long distance swimmer. I didn't even have any classes with him, but sometimes I stayed late for the second lunch shift to hang out next to him. I told him once I wanted to join the swim team—though I couldn't swim a hundred yards without drowning.

Though he was beautiful and I had stared at his muscles sliding like dolphins under the skin of his upper arms, and I had imagined changing next to him in gym, I didn't think of him when I touch myself. That's how I knew it was love. Like the way I loved autumn, how it made me cry when Dad raked up leaves, or the way I touched trees as I passed them—though if Jerry was with me, I'd do it surreptitiously, so it looked cool, like I was in an REM video and not like I was trying to talk to the trees through my fingers.

Dad had stopped talking; he was looking over at me strong.

Maybe I missed my cue, I thought. I should be saying something, or at least Dad's expression suggested that. So I looked down at my lap, as though I was hurt, or stunned—too stunned to speak. In a way, I was. Stunned that he'd chosen to talk about what I already knew, and not once asked me about what he didn't.

"I know it's hard on you," he said, just as I expected.

You don't know a thing, I thought—not about me, or Mom. I wondered if I'd ever find a way to be with Aaron, with any guy.

"It's been hard," he said, "for me, too."

Well, if you think your fifteen-year-old son is going to help you, forget it, I thought. My hard-on was going down.

"I've laid awake all night, thinking about it," Dad said. "I can't

work. It consumes everything." It. "And your mom has everyone in the family against me, somehow," Dad said. Then he took off his hat and looked away, out the window. The gesture was dramatic, sweeping.

I wanted to say, "I love Aaron Platz and I'm scared shitless to tell anyone, especially him. Is that fair?" But I knew I couldn't. I didn't want to seem as helpless as Dad.

Dad cracked the window and turned down the heat, because it was getting awful steamy for a car with two guys in it. "I can't imagine living with anyone but her," he said.

Ah, there's the root of the problem, I thought: a lack of imagination. I surveyed the wrinkles of my jeans. It's time, I thought, to get out. "I understand," I said in a kind tone, and rested my hand on Dad's shoulder. "But I have to go."

Dad nodded and said, "Of course. I'm sorry."

I asked him for a note, and as he fumbled through his own coat pockets for pen and paper, I opened my door and stood in the pile of dry leaves that filled the gutter along the curb. The wind outside was strong, almost sour, and I felt the heat pour out from the car like a river.

"Thanks for listening," Dad said and handed me the note.

"Sure," I said. Then I waved once and closed the door.

Dad waited until I crossed the street before he drove off, the Impala shaking as it gained momentum in the cold air.

Half way down the hill, I saw Aaron's Mom's car pull up. Blood choked in my chest. He was late, too. If I walked fast, I could catch him before he got in the door. It happened even better than that. He was still in the car when I reached the sidewalk, and I began to walk

over when I saw through his window that he was hugging his Mom. It was beautiful to see, but he'd be embarrassed if he was caught, so I looked away, though I slowed my step.

Aaron's door opened. "Me too," he said into the car and closed his door. And then, there he was.

"Late?" I said. I had rehearsed the word.

"Yeah," Aaron said, laughing, like we were inside the same joke. The wind was strong, even near the building, but we both stopped at the foot of the school's granite steps, each concave hollow tracing where heavy traffic ran.

"Want a hit before going in?" Aaron asked.

I felt like a dam, holding back a lake, letting out a trickle of it at a time. "Sure," I said. "Sure."

We walked further down the hill into the woods below the school, silent. Aaron was in front of me. Somehow, I decided then that I was going to tell him how I felt about him, after we got high.

My hands were in my pockets and the fingers of my right hand sweated against Dad's note. I took it out and read it, to make sure he hadn't written down the time. He hadn't. He'd only put the date and signed his name beneath his standard line:

Please excuse Patrick. He was with me.

The words were familiar, almost comforting, and I stared at them a long while before I put the note back in my pocket.

In front of me, the short brown hairs of Aaron's neck were like a meadow of dark, rich wheat. I thought of placing my lips there, softly, so I could feel each hair—but I didn't. Everything was small down inside my jeans—maybe from the cold, or from fear, or from true love,

my brain keeping those two kinds of desire separate. All I knew at that moment was that I was happy. And whatever Aaron said to me later would somehow be all right. I squeezed the note in my hand and followed each of Aaron's steps as he made his way down the hill, deep into the woods where we would smoke. □